

VZCZCXRO1834
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHPF #0203/01 0860901
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 270901Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 2687
RUEHNA/DEA WASHDC PRIORITY 0002
RHHMUNA/USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHHMUNB/JIATF WEST PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000203

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, EAP/RSP, INL/AAE -- AMY CARLON
BANGKOK FOR TCAO -- SCOTT ROLSTON, AND DEA -- CHAD ESCH

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SNAR](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [CB](#)
SUBJECT: SECOND LARGE METHAMPHETAMINE BUST PUTS CAMBODIA ON
THE PRODUCTION MAP

REF: 07 PHNOM PENH 515

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over the weekend of March 21-22 a police raid of four separate locations uncovered significant amounts of illicit chemicals and resulted in the arrest of 5 individuals, including 2 Chinese nationals. The amount of chemicals and plant substances seized in the raids, when combined, could produce approximately 112 kilograms of pure methamphetamine with a wholesale street value of over \$4 million and a tablet value of over \$15 million U.S. dollars. A Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent, along with the Australian Federal Police (AFP) Specialist Response Team, assisted the Cambodian Anti-Drug Department (CADD) to assess the locations and identify the chemicals, which were found to be indicative of a "red phosphorous cook," a type of methamphetamine production used to produce multiple kilograms at a time. This recent bust follows almost 2 years to the day since the first ever methamphetamine "superlab" was discovered in Cambodia (Ref A), and further illustrates the emergence of this small SE Asian country as a source for narcotics production, transit, and consumption. END SUMMARY.

SOMETHING SMELLS FISHY

¶2. (SBU) In connected raids of four separate locations, the CADD along with local police arrested 5 individuals and seized illicit plants and chemicals used in the production of methamphetamines. According to a CADD official, the locations, one in Kampong Cham province, two in Phnom Penh, and one in Takeo, had been under surveillance since January ¶26. Local police in Kampong Cham were originally tipped off by concerned civilians who reported strange smells coming from a neighboring fish farm. The farm, run by a 52-year-old Cambodian male, was used as a front for the manufacture and storage of the illicit plants and chemicals. More than 2.3 tons of ephedra grass and 14 kg of ephedra seeds were among the items seized from the Kampong Cham location. Banned in the U.S. in 2004, ephedra-containing supplements are used for the common cold, asthma and hay fever, as well as to enhance performance and diet. Ephedra is also used as a precursor for methamphetamines.

A WHOLE LOT OF DOPE

¶3. (SBU) The bust, which the DEA agent involved described as "major" with the potential to make "a whole lot of dope,"

included the above 2.357 tons of ephedra plants capable of producing 161 kilograms of ephedrine, 24 kilograms of red phosphorous, 600 kilograms of sodium hydroxide, over 300 liters of xylene, iodine, barium sulfite, as well as undetermined chemicals and paraphernalia such as industrial-sized ovens, triple-neck flasks (the possession of which is a 5 year felony in the U.S.) and a tableting machine. Used together, these items are capable of producing over 5 million tablets of meth with a local street value of over \$15 million U.S. dollars, or 112 kilograms of pure meth with a wholesale street value of almost \$4 million U.S. dollars. According to DEA and the CADD, the ephedra plants were imported rather than grown in Cambodia, although the presence of ephedra seeds and a cleared portion of land suggest that the soil and climate were being tested as a potential new locale for ephedra cultivation, which typically only grows in China and India. This is the first time DEA has seen the plant outside of those two areas) generally the ephedrine is extracted and exported in powder or in tablet form for meth production elsewhere.

14. (SBU) The tableting machine, which is capable of producing 3,000 to 3,600 pills an hour, had evidence of prior use as did a condensing tube. However, all other equipment, including Pyrex dishes typical in meth labs and the triple neck flasks, were clean. All equipment was made in China. DEA and AFP determined that although some minor testing may have commenced, CADD had hit the locations prior to full-scale production. The Kampong Cham site was used to extract ephedrine from the ephedra plant, the Takeo site was a wooden shed behind a house which seemed to serve solely as a storage facility, one of the Phnom Penh sites was storage

PHNOM PENH 00000203 002 OF 002

and possibly used to make powder from the ephedrine oil, and the second Phnom Penh location (a nice two-story home where the two Chinese were arrested) was the planned manufacture site. According to DEA, the different staging locations spread throughout the country are indicative of the way Chinese typically set up their methamphetamine production and trafficking rings.

NEW BOSS MAKING A NAME

15. (SBU) This bust comes on the heels of General Ke Kim Yan's appointment as Deputy Prime Minister and the President of Cambodia's National Authority for Combating Drugs and is seen by some as a way for him to show he is serious about drug crimes in Cambodia. Others feel it is an opportunity for some of his new employees to get into his good graces. Of significance in this case is the apparent cooperation between several different police units throughout the investigation to include provincial anti-drug units, district police forces, and the CADD. Furthermore, according to the DEA and AFP, the CADD used more caution with handling the chemicals compared to their experience two years ago in Kampong Speu. However, the CADD confiscated and transported some equipment and dangerous chemicals, including xylene and sodium hydroxide which can quickly burn through the skin, to their headquarters and failed to secure them in ventilated rooms, which could cause serious health risks and contaminated food items stored in the same location. Furthermore, the prosecutor involved in the case was extremely angry that any of the items had been moved without his knowledge and presence.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Cambodia has long been a route for drug traffickers, but in recent years we have seen both use and production on the rise. According to DEA and others, this most recent bust provides further proof that Cambodia is on its way to becoming Grand Central for drug production. The availability of chemicals, glassware, equipment, remote areas for staging, a high local and regional demand for the finished product and Chinese backing all create a perfect

package for methamphetamine production. The capacity of the police force in investigating such cases seems to have increased, although their knowledge and ability to contain a crime scene is still minimal. According to Graham Shaw at World Health Organization, the local demand for meth will only grow due to the global economic crisis as more youth are unemployed, and may entice users and entrepreneurs to start into the meth production business. Add to that an almost complete lack of quality drug treatment in the country and you have the potential of an unstable social and criminal situation developing within Cambodia. END COMMENT
RODLEY